

A Promise, A Compromise by dontburnthewitch

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Summary: Things won't ever go back to normal. And that's okay.

A Promise, A Compromise

The Gate had closed. The tumultuous months that followed wreaked havoc on the party. They hardly spoke of it, but a mutual agony boiled below the surface. Mike saw it when the power flickered during snowstorms, and when they all consciously avoided going out at night.

After Will recovered first time, it felt like a fluke - a case of bad luck. Tragedy had befallen them. It was rough. Rougher on some more than others. And in the wake of Will's reappearance, it was like they had all worked their way back into the safety of normalcy in Hawkins.

But now, their vulnerability had been revealed. The Upside Down had gotten Will twice, threatening everyone and everything else in the process. It hadn't been just simple misfortune. The darkness - the things that go bump in the night - were excruciatingly real. They had hurt them before, and they could certainly do it again. Mike had never felt so utterly naked and alone.

El was there to ground him. He spent afternoons trudging through the snow up to the cabin to meet her. He memorized Hopper's defense systems along the way, but not without mistakes. Already, he'd set off trip wires on two different occasions, flinging El into momentary panic. The two would find themselves wrapped in a blanket on Hopper's couch. They pretended to watch television, but they both knew what a mindless daze they were in. Nothing felt real anymore. Mike would grip El's hand just to ensure he could feel something that wasn't complete exhaustion.

And El would touch his face, holding his cheek in a firm grip. She still hadn't mastered the art of compassionate touch, but Mike almost preferred being handled roughly. Even if momentary, it snapped him out of the sleepy trance that had worsened since autumn.

"Are you still there?" El often asked, looking into his eyes as though she were trying to visually locate his dreary soul escaping his body. "Please don't go."

"I won't," was the only reply Mike could manage. He had no intention on leaving, physically or mentally. He needed to keep himself glued to reality. It's just that reality didn't seem too fond of keeping him around.

Dustin and Lucas hardly bickered anymore. On the surface, it was a nice change. They spoke softly in the school hallways, and during those evenings in Mike's basement. They'd quietly share their comics and arcade quarters. But the hurt was apparent there too. In the cafeteria, they'd find themselves eating in near silence. Max tried her damn best to liven up conversation. And while the gesture was appreciated, and as much as he was growing to like spending time with her, a voice in the back of Mike's head still reminded him that she'd never understand. She wasn't there the first time Will fell victim to the Upside Down. She'd only seen glimpses of the terror during the second time. She had no reason to fear a third round. Or a fourth. Or a fifth... If they could make it that far.

Will seemed to be the only one who could keep a consistent smile. Yet, Mike still knew that it came easily to Will - feigning happiness under duress. He'd suffered in silence for years. He was good at that. And, as much as it destroyed Mike, he had immense difficulty broaching the subject with Will.

But that didn't stop him from trying. One frigid January afternoon, the two got together. Mike, inviting Will in from the cold, realized he'd hardly had any time alone with Will since that awful night in the shed. He made them both some hot chocolate, nearly spilling it on his descent down the wooden stairs. Will trailed behind as they settled on the couch.

Will eyed the corner of the rec room. "How long are you keeping that up?" he asked, motioning to the blanket fort set up beneath the window. "I don't think she'll fit it anymore."

Mike sipped his drink, "I think I'll take it down eventually. It's already fallen over a few times. Mom doesn't like it."

"Does it, um... make you feel safe?"

Mike nodded, eyes drifting back towards the fort. He didn't want to

tell Will how, despite El being safe and nearby, he still spent nights curled up where she used to sleep. He didn't want to talk about how tear-stained and filthy the blankets had gotten. He especially didn't want to bring up that time he tried moving it to his own bedroom, only to be hideously embarrassed by his mom's protests.

"I get that," Will said. "Sometimes I wish Castle Byers was still around, so I'd have some place to escape. When it's nicer outside, obviously."

"You're always welcome here, hey?"

"I know," Will sighed. "I don't want to frustrate you, or annoy you, or whatever. I get that I'm tough to deal with sometimes."

Mike snorted, "Since when has that ever mattered? We're all dealing with it. You don't have to do it alone."

Will was quiet, spending his gap in the conversation with the mug of cocoa at his lips. He placed it down on the table, and Mike had a sneaking suspicion he was intentionally averting his gaze.

Usually when this kind of awkward silence came upon their discussions, Mike was quick to change the subject. He still had that urge burning in the back of his brain, shouting warnings at him, but this time he persisted.

"I know you're feeling super left out," Mike said "I mean, I have El. Lucas has Max. Dustin has... well... his new cat."

Will scoffed and shook his head.

"You know what I mean. We all have somebody or something to distract us. You have your drawing, but I'm not sure if that's even working. I don't think I've seen you finish a drawing in forever."

Will's expression soured, "Not since my house was covered in them."

"Oh," Mike said, his mind flooding with images of Will's scribbly tunnel map of the town. "You haven't even tried?"

"It reminds me too much of what happened," Will said. "I think I need

some time away from it."

"I guess that makes sense," Mike muttered, fidgeting with the spoon in his mug and trying to brainstorm something else to help Will. "Hey, what about that girl from the Snow Ball? She seemed interested. Maybe you could, you know, ask her out?"

"Jeez, Mike," Will suddenly snapped, and Mike shrunk back into the cushions. "Could you just not?"

"I'm only trying to find things to help you."

"That's not going to help, Mike."

"I didn't mean to upset you," Mike said, putting his mug on the table and shifting in his seat. "You've gone through so much bullshit, and it's not fair. I want you to be happy."

Whatever rage had momentarily taken hold of Will had subsided. He reclined back into the cushions and drew a blanket around his legs. Mike reached out and gently placed his palm on his friend's knee. He didn't say anything. Words hardly assembled in his mouth before he swallowed them again. He gave Will a pat and pulled back to his corner of the sofa.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you like that," Will said, gazing at the spot where Mike's hand had been. "I've been saying I'm fine for so long, and I've been lying. Maybe I've been telling myself this whole time that if I think I'm okay, then I'll be okay."

"You're going to be okay, Will. All of us are. But we need to do this together, or else it's not going to work at all."

"But you just said I needed to find someone else to talk to," Will said. "And that girl at the Snow Ball? I hardly even know her. How am I supposed to unload all this baggage on her too?"

"No, no..." Mike waved his hand dismissively. "I meant that maybe dating someone might cheer you up a little. You're a nice guy. Girls should be lining down the block to get with you."

Will narrowed his lips and knit his brows together. Mike felt

hopeless. Every single thing he tried seemed fruitless.

"I don't know, Will," Mike said. "I'm trying to make suggestions."

"It's not just the Upside Down that's bothering me," Will said, his words spaced apart and slightly wavering in pitch.

Mike frowned and leaned closer. Will looked like he was on the verge of saying something, but kept biting back words. Seeing this, Mike shuffled closer to his friend, sliding his hand onto his shoulder. Will strained away from the touch, making Mike abandon his efforts.

"You can tell me, you know?" Mike said, his hand thudding to his lap in defeat. "And then we can get through it together. Remember? Crazy together. We promised."

It took Will a few moments to answer, each second teasing Mike with further worry. Was Will sick? Did he do something bad? Or worse... Did something bad - something else bad - happen to him?

None of that was the case.

"I, um... I don't like girls," Will said, line of sight pressed to the floor.

"You mean you like...?" the gears were clicking in Mike's head. The things Lonnie used to say. The things the kids at school said.

"Yeah," Will breathed. "And I get it, if you feel uncomfortable around me now. I'm not going to do anything to you, I swear."

"Will," Mike said firmly. "It doesn't matter to me, honestly. If you like guys, that's okay. Nancy says she has friends like that and they're cool people. You're a cool person too. Always have been."

He flashed a smile, but Will's stony expression remained unmoved. "You don't get it, Mike," he said. "I like you."

"Oh."

Mike certainly felt caught off-guard. Maybe he'd had suspicions about Will being into guys. It was a possibility they'd all considered. It never stopped the Party from coming to his defense when Troy or the

other kids at school called Will names about it. Will's confirmation of that fact only seemed to bring closure to it.

But that Will liked Mike? Now, that was a tough one.

Mike stumbled through his next words, "Yeah. No. I'm sorry. I don't like you that way. I'm with El, anyways. I don't like... boys."

Will's face grew red and Mike knew nothing he just said had come out right. The poor guy had just bared his soul only to be met with Mike Wheeler's clumsy rejection. Oh, poor Will. He deserved so much better.

"I figured as much," Will mumbled, pulling the blanket closer to his chest. He exhaled and blinked away the tears stinging the edges of his eyes, trying his best to turn away from Mike.

Something fell inside of Mike. His heart ached. He couldn't stand to see Will like this. Worse yet, it was his fault.

"Will, I'm sorry," Mike said carefully, struggling to calm his own racing brain, or otherwise beat it into submission so he could avoid hurting Will any further. "Believe me, I care about you. A whole lot. I've known you so long that you're basically a part of me. I just don't feel the same way."

Will sniffled, still not looking at him.

"I..." Mike pushed against his own better judgment. He knew he meant his next words. He honestly did. They just felt so unbearably real coming out of his mouth. "I wish I could feel that way, Will. You deserve to be happy, and I'm sorry I can't give that to you."

"It's fine," Will said, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. "I'll get over it eventually."

"Yeah," Mike said quietly, having run out of words for the moment.

Will reached for his mug again, but couldn't drink. He was still swallowing back the lump in his throat. Mike desperately wanted to reach out and comfort his friend, but the confession loomed overhead. He'd rejected him, but he still didn't want Will to get the

wrong idea.

He decided to perform an experiment. For just a moment, he cleared his mind of everything Will just told him. Cleared the biases. Cleared the questions and worries beginning to take root inside his brain. He concentrated on one question: how did he really feel about Will?

He certainly cared about him. He loved him, in fact. Not romantically, of course, but he'd have no issue with admitting his love for his friend. They'd exchanged those words on a few occasions, usually in a lighthearted and joking manner. He never felt like he'd held back when expressing his affection. They'd hugged plenty of times, and even held hands. Will never made him feel uncomfortable, and even in light of what he confessed, it wasn't any different.

So then, a thought occurred to him.

"Hey, Will?" Mike said, his voice soft and reassuring. He reached over and put his hand back on Will's shoulder, only this time Will didn't shy away.

Will finally turned to look at him, tear trails visible on his cheeks and spots of red in his eyes, and Mike so terribly wanted to pull him into an embrace.

"I can't feel the same way, and even if I did, I'm still with El," Mike began. "But still, I want to give you the next best thing. A compromise, right?"

"What do you mean?" Will croaked.

"Well, you're lonely. And I know it's hard to ask, but if you want to - you know - hug more often, then we can do that."

"Okay."

Mike went on, "And if you want, we can cuddle."

"That wouldn't bother you?"

Mike shook his head, a smile creeping to his lips. "No way," he said.

Tentatively, Will leaned over towards him. Mike instantly threw his arms around his friend, reclining back and pulling Will into his chest.

"You're so brave, you know?" Mike said, threading his fingers through Will's hair. "I wish I could give you what you want. I hope this is good enough, because you'll be my friend no matter what."

"It still hurts," Will said. "But like I said, I'll get over it eventually."

"We'll both get through it," Mike whispered, pressing a fleeting kiss to the top of Will's head. "Crazy together. I promise."

While they sat, pressed against each other and drifting into a doze, Mike came to realize that he didn't need to feel so alone either.